The Mother and the Child

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Maria Montessori, M.D.

A Lecture by Doctor Montessori delivered before the National Education Association in August, 1915, and reprinted from the Journal of the Association, 1915.

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THE MOTHER AND THE CHILD

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The mothers of today take far more intelligent care of their children than did the mothers of the past, and this is not because they love their children more but because the science of medicine, by establishing rules for child hygiene, has materially aided the mission of motherhood. Thus the treatment accorded the child has brought great change to the mission of motherhood. Above all, it has vitally transformed some of the principles, that is to say, some of the ideas as to the real influence that we may have on a child as he develops. Let us rapidly survey these transformations.

What used to take place? Perhaps there are some who still remember having seen certain practices, considered a universal dogma at one time. The child was wrapped in swaddling clothes to avoid having crooked legs; his tongue had to be clipped so that he might some day talk; he always wore a cap to keep his ears from standing out; care was always taken to lay the baby down in such positions as not to run the risk of doing permanent injury to his delicate head; the good mothers

also rubbed the little newborn baby's nose so that it would grow long and slender and not remain too short and stumpy; they even put gold ear-rings on him at birth because this supposedly made his sight keener.

In some countries these practices are doubtless forgotten, but in some they are still in use. Who does not remember the means used to help the child in learning to walk? In the first months—at a time of life when the nerve paths are not yet developed and it is impossible for the child to co-ordinate his movements—mothers would waste several half hours a day trying to teach the child to walk. They held the babe by his body and used the disordered movements of the little feet to delude themselves into thinking that these were the beginnings of walking, and because the child began, little by little, to put one foot in front of the other and to gain confidence in the use of his feet, the mothers attributed all this progress to their previous efforts.

When the control of movement was somewhat established—but not equilibrium, or the power of standing upon his feet—the mothers used straps to support the baby body and thus had him walk with them, or when they could not spare the time, they would put the child into an ambulator—which having a broad base

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could not tip over—and there he stayed, his arms hanging over the side, his little body supported by the rim, and tho he did not know how to stand still, he went forward by moving his feet—that is, he walked.

What did science reveal when it entered the field of child welfare? Certainly it offered no sure means of strengthening the nose and ears, and it did not enlighten the mothers as to the ways of teaching a child, even from birth, how to walk. No, first of all, it uttered the firm conviction that nature herself sees to determining the shape of the head, nose, and ears; that man will talk well without the need of clipping his tongue; that the legs grow straight naturally; not only this, but the fact that the function of deambulation is established of itself in nature and has no need of assistance. Hence we must let nature act of its own accord as freely as possible and the more a child is left free to develop, the sooner and the more perfectly will he attain his higher forms and functions. Abolish then the swathing-bands and recommend great peace and comfort when he rests. The child, with his limbs free, should be left lying quietly, not tossed up and down or rocked as many used to do, thinking they were amusing

him; neither should he be forced to walk before his time. When the hour comes he will arise and walk.

Today almost everyone is convinced of these facts, and swaddling clothes, girths, and ambulators have almost disappeared from sale. Children, therefore, have straighter legs and walk better and at an earlier age than formerly.

This fact is well established, and it is a great relief, for in truth what a burden it was to think that the straightness of the legs, the form of the nose, of the ears, of the head, were all the direct results of our care! What a responsibility, for which all felt unfit! What a joy to say, "It is nature's task. I will leave the child free, I will watch him grow in beauty, I will assist quietly at the miracle."

These new concepts have up to now been confined to the body. As regards the inner life of the child there has not been a like progress, for in this we are still in a stage similar to that other which, by the help of science, we have left behind.

Something of the kind is coming for the child's inner life. Indeed, we are assailed with questions. The character must be molded, the intellect developed, the feelings guided, and we ask ourselves, What shall we do? Here

and there we touch the child's soul, or we confine it more or less as the mothers did by rubbing the child's nose or bandaging his ears. We hide our anxiety behind a sort of medium success, since men do grow up with character, intellect, and feelings. When, however, all these qualities are lacking, we are overcome. What shall we do? Who can endow a degenerate with character, an idiot with intellect, a moral degenerate with feelings? If, indeed, it were by merely touching the soul here and there that man gained all these qualities, then it would suffice to touch a little more energetically him who was lacking. But such is not the case. Hence we are no more creators of the inner form than of the outer.

It is nature, it is creation, which directs all these things. When once we are convinced of this, there is born within us the principle of the necessity of not putting obstacles in the way of natural development, and instead of so many different problems, such as what to do to develop character, intellect, and feelings, one problem only would present itself as the basis of all education—how to give the child freedom.

In this freedom there must be included principles analogous to those which science dictated for the forms and functions of the

body during the period of growth, a freedom in which the head, nose, and ears became more beautiful and deambulation the most perfect possible, according to the congenital forces of the individual. So here freedom as the only means should carry the character, the intellect, and the feelings to the highest point of development possible to the individual, and it should give to us, who are directing this work, peace and the opportunity of contemplating the miracle of growth.

This freedom liberates us, too, from the anxious burden of an imaginary responsibility and a dangerous illusion. Woe to us if we believe ourselves responsible for things which do not concern us and delude ourselves into thinking that we bring things to pass which, on the contrary, take place without any reference to us. What, then, has become of our real mission, of our real responsibility? What wrongs, what real sins are we committing?

The history of the child's physical redemption has for us a most interesting sequence. It does seem strange to us today to consider that at a time when infant diseases were a scourge, it was not the death-rate which held the attention, but the form of the nose or the legs, whereas the vital question passed unnoticed. The mortality statistics revealed

such high figures that the phenomenon was named the "slaughter of the innocents." The famous statistics of Lexis, which do not refer to any one country but to the average death-rate of humanity in general, shows that this terrifying truth was universal. It has two factors: One undoubtedly is the characteristic weakness of the child; the other, the want of protection for his weakness, a lack which was general among all peoples.

Certainly there was no want of good-will or feeling of love toward the children, but a something unknown was wanting: the means of combating a dreadful peril which took place all unnoticed. We know today that infectious diseases, especially those of intestinal origin, were the cause of such great mortality. Intestinal diseases diminish nutrition or produce poisons at an age in which the delicate tissues are most sensitive and they were responsible for almost the entire slaughter.

Then the wrongs which were being habitually committed against infants stood forth, wrongs comprised in a lack of cleanliness which today would astound us and in an absolute want of any rules as to the feeding of babies. The soiled linens which enveloped the child were often merely hung out to dry sev-

eral times and used over again and again before being washed. No care was taken to wash either the nipple or the baby's mouth, in spite of the fact of fermentation so serious to cause local sickness. The infant nursed without any regularity; night and day the baby's cries governed the time of nursing and the more indigestion and suffering increased the more his feedings were increased, thus aggravating his condition.

Science gave the simplest rules; it advised the most perfect cleanliness possible and it pointed out a principle so evident in itself that it was amazing that everyone had not understood it from the beginning, namely: A baby, like an adult, must fast at times and can take new food only after the preceding has been digested, and so the nursing periods should come at regular intervals, varying according to age, following the modifications of the physiological functions in their development. Nor should crusts of bread be given the child—as so many mothers do, especially the very poor—to calm his crying, for he might swallow the hard particles before he is able to digest them.

It was science which, redeeming the children. brought about trained nurse girls, cradles for all, rooms and proper clothing, and

especially prepared foods made by great concerns for the hygienic feeding of children after weaning. Indeed, it created an entirely new world for them—intelligent, clean, and pleasing. The child became the new man, who has wrested his rights from life and who has, therefore, had to create an environment for himself. Thus we see that infant mortality diminishes in direct proportion to the diffusion of the rules of child hygiene.

If, therefore, we say that spiritually also the child should be left free because nature—and not we—is the creator who molds him, we do not mean by that to abandon him and leave him to his own devices.

Perhaps, however, if we study the situation, we will realize that, tho we may not be able to act directly on the child's individual forms of character, intellect, and feeling, which we have overlooked and on which depend the life and death of the spirit; yet there are a certain series of obligations and a round of cares which it is our duty to perform.

The criterion of liberty is not then one of abandoning the child, but by leading us from illusion to truth, it points the way to the positive and most efficacious manner of caring for children.

Freedom of the Child of Today Merely a Physical Freedom — Civil Rights of Children in the Twentieth Century

Hygiene has freed the child's physical life. The external proofs, which consist in the doing away with the swaddling clothes, in the open-air life, in giving sufficient rest, and the like, are, in general, the most visible and tangible part, but they constitute only a means of attaining freedom. A far more important step toward freedom has been that of removing from the path of life the dangers of disease and death.

As soon as the obstacle caused by some of these fundamental errors was removed, not only did the children survive in greater numbers, but it was proved that they grew better and healthier. Was it really hygiene which helped them to increase in weight, in stature, in beauty, and also in general growth? Hygiene did not do all of this. The gospels say: "Who is able to add one cubit to man's stature?" Hygiene only freed the child's body from the obstacles which were preventing his growth. There were external bands that hindered the growth and the entire natural evolution of life. Hygiene broke these bands

asunder and everybody realized that a liberation had taken place. When this was an accomplished fact everyone said: "Children must be free." Now the direct relation between "attained conditions of physical life" and "acquired freedom" is universally felt.

In that way the child is treated like a little plant. For years plants in an orchard or a garden were well kept; they had gained rights and privileges which the child had only just now attained—good food, oxygen, a suitable temperature, and minute protection from the parasites which cause plant disease. Today the son of a prince can have as good care as the most beautiful rosebud in a lovely villa.

The old saying, "A child is like a flower," is what we hope today to make a reality, but it is as yet a privilege accorded only to the more fortunate children. But let us arouse ourselves from so great a mistake. The child is a man. What is enough for a plant is not enough for a human being. We must always hold before us the picture of the child as the future man, we must see him in the bustling humanity which seeks with such heroic efforts to attain the goal of life.

What are the rights of children? Let us consider them for a moment as a class in society, a laboring class, for they do indeed

labor to produce men. They are the future generation. They labor and endure the hardships of the physical and spiritual growth. They are continuing the work performed for a few months by their mothers, and to them is left the performing of the more arduous, more complex, and more difficult task. When they are born they have naught but potentiality, yet they must do everything in a world which, even on the word of an adult, is full of difficulties. What is done to aid these weak pilgrims in an unknown world? They are born weaker and more helpless than an animal, and they must in a few years become men; must be a part of an organized and complicated society, built on the secular effort of innumerable generations. At an age in which civilization—that is to say the possibility of living well—is based on rights acquired by force and incorporated into laws, what are the rights of him who comes among us without strength and without thought?

Let us see how the laws of society receive a child into the world. We are in the twentieth century, yet in many civilized nations foundling homes and the practice of using wet nurses are still institutions.

What is this foundling home? It is a prison in a dark dungeon, where all too often the

prisoner finds death, as was the case in those mediaeval dungeons where the victim, judged in secret, disappeared unknown to anyone. He will never see his own people, his family name is blotted out of existence, his goods are confiscated. Any malefactor whosoever has greater rights than he, and yet no one could better prove his innocence.

The maternal duty of nursing one's children proclaimed by hygiene is founded on the physiological fact that the mother's milk is more nourishing than is any other milk. It is true there is the law of property rights which is final. One need only steal a roll, starving tho he be, to become a thief, to be punished by law and put outside the pale of society. But as regards babies, what more sacred right is there than that the baby shall have its mother's milk? There is no doubt as to the legality of his right; his only capital, the milk, came into the world with him and for him. All his wealth is there; his power of life, of growth, of gaining strength depends on that nourishment. If ever the defrauded child were to be weak and have rickets, what will become of him, condemned as he is by poverty to a hard occupation? If some day the child, having attained to manhood, should present his case before society's court of

justice, what a just cause he would have for damages because of his inability to work and his permanent injuries!

What distinguishes us from cannibals and pirates is the fact that the rights of the adults are recognized. Not so the child's rights. What cowardliness to recognize the adult's rights and not those of the child! Shall we give justice only to those who can defend and protect themselves and in all else remain barbarians? The peoples of today may have attained a greater or less degree of evolution from the standpoint of hygiene, but they all belong to the same civilization, i.e., the rights of the strong.

When we intend to consider seriously the problem of the child's moral education, we should glance around and at least be cognizant of the world we have prepared for him. Do we desire that, like ourselves, he may unheedingly trample on the weak? That he may hold ideas of justice which halt before one who cannot protest? Do we wish to make of him a half-civilized man, when he meets his equals, and a half-beast when he comes in contact with the hosts of oppressed and innocent? If we keep in our conscience facts of such serious injustice, not to call them crimes,

without ever being aware of them, what may not be the lesser evils which will descend on the child?

How We Receive the Children Who Come Into the World

Until recently nothing was ready to receive this wonderful guest. It is only recently that little beds for children have been manufactured. There used to be no washstands, no armchairs, no little tables, no brushes. From among so many houses, not one house for them; only very rich and privileged children have their own room, and it is almost a place of exile.

Let us imagine enduring for a single day the torment to which they are condemned.

Supposing that we should find ourselves among a giant people, whose legs were exceedingly long in comparison with ours, whose bodies were enormous, but who were very quick as compared with us—an exceedingly agile, intelligent people. If we wish to climb their stairs, the steps are high, on a level with our knee, and yet we have to try to climb up with them. If we wish to sit down, the chair reaches almost to our shoulders. Climbing

up with difficulty, we finally succeed in perching ourselves on it. We would like to brush our dress, but the big brushes are so heavy that our hand cannot even grasp, much less hold, them. For brushing our nails we are given a clothes brush. We could easily take a bath in the wash basin, but our arms would not be strong enough to lift it. If we knew that these giants were expecting us to do so, we would say: "They have made no preparation to receive us, to make our visit comfortable." The child finds all that he could wish for in the form of toys or dolls. The rich, multiform, attractive environment was not made for him, whereas dolls have houses, with sitting-rooms, kitchens, and closets—everything which the adult possesses is reproduced in miniature for the doll. The child, however, cannot actually live with all these things—he can only play with them. The world has been given to him as a joke, because as yet no one has admitted that he is a living man. He finds that society has prepared an ironical reception for him.

The child really tries to live with all the things that surround him. He would really like to use a washstand by himself, to dress himself, actually to comb the hair on a living head, really to sweep the floors; he,

too, would like to possess chairs, tables, armchairs, clothes hooks and closets. What he wants is really to work, to attain an intelligent end, to have the enjoyment of his own life. Besides, he must not only act like a man, but he must actually form the man; this is the predominating tendency of his nature, his mission. The smallest thing suffices to make him happy—to hang his clothes on a hook placed low on the wall within his reach, to open a light door whose knob is in proportion to his hand, silently and lightly to move a chair whose weight is adapted to the strength of his arms. It is a very simple matter to offer him an environment where everything is built in proportion to his size, and to let him live there. Then there develops in him that active life which has caused so much wonder, because we see in him the revelation of a spiritual life. In that harmonious environment we have seen the child concentrated on intellectual work, as a seed which has taken root in the right ground, and from that develop and grow by one means only—prolonged constancy in each exercise.

When the little ones are seen acting in this way, intent upon their work, slow in carrying it out because of the immaturity of their constitutions, as they are slow in walking, be-

cause their legs are still short, one has the intuitive feeling that they are perfecting their lives, as a chrysalis slowly perfects the butterfly within its cocoon. To hinder their occupations would be to commit violence against their life. On the contrary, what is generally done to children? We all interrupt them without the slightest regard, without the slightest respect, with the manners which were used by masters toward slaves who had no human rights. To have the same regard for a child as for an adult would seem ridiculous to many people, and yet with what severity we say to children ,"Do not interrupt us." If the little one is doing something, for example eating by himself, an adult comes along and feeds him; if he is trying to put on his apron, the adult runs to dress him; all brutally take his place, without the slightest respect. And yet we are keenly aware of the proprietorship of our work and whoever tries to take our place offends us.

What would happen to us were we to become slaves to a people incapable of comprehending the sensitiveness of our feelings—a giant people, stronger than ourselves? While we are quietly eating our soup, relishing it, at our pleasure (and we know what an enjoyment is found in this freedom), a giant comes

along and grabs the spoon from our hand and makes us swallow so fast that we almost choke. Our protest, "For goodness sake, wait," would be accompanied by a contraction of the heart and our digestion would be endangered. If another time, while thinking of something pleasant, we were slowly putting on our coat with that satisfaction and that liberty which we have in our own home, and a giant should light upon us, and in the twinkling of an eye, having dressed us, should carry us bodily out of the door, we would feel our dignity so belittled that the whole pleasure of the walk would be lost. Our nourishment does not come simply and purely from the soup swallowed, and the well-being does not come simply and purely from the walk, but also from the freedom which accompanies all these things. We would feel rebellious and offended, not certainly because of hatred of these giants, but only because of the love for an inner tendency to let our life function freely. There is something within us that man does not know, which, one might say, with an expression easily understood, God alone knows, and He is imperceptibly manifesting it to us that we fulfil it. It is this love which more deeply nourishes and gives the feeling of well-being to our life, even in its

most minute acts. Because of this it is said that "Man does not live by bread alone." How much more true is this in the case of the child, where creation is at work?

Children must defend their little acquisitions in the environment by struggles and rebellion. When they want to exercise the senses, for instance that of touch, everyone reprimands them, saying, "Don't touch!" If they try to take some object from the kitchen, some leftovers to make a pie within a little plate, they are chased away, they are mercilessly led back to their toys. How many times one of those wonderful moments, in which their attention is fixed, and that process of organization which must develop them is starting within them, has been brusquely interrupted, as the spontaneous efforts of the children are seeking blindly in the environment for those things with which to nourish their intellect. Have we not all perhaps had the feeling that something in our life has been crushed forever?

Let us picture adults who were not settled in life, as are most men, but were in a state of inner autocreation like men of genius. Suppose a writer to be under poetical inspiration, and about to give to humanity a helpful and inspiring message. Or let us take the mathe-

matician who sights the solution of a great problem whence would spring new principles useful to humanity. Or take an artist whose mind is conceiving the ideal image which must be put on the canvas immediately so that a masterpiece may not be lost. Imagine such men at such psychological moments. Suppose there came into their presence a cruel person calling aloud to them to follow, and this person should take them by the hand and then push them out. To what purpose? To play a game of chess. "Oh," they would say, "you could not have done anything worse to us. Our inspiration is lost, humanity will be deprived of a poem, a masterpiece, a useful discovery, because of this foolishness."

But the child loses not only a product, but himself as well, for the masterpiece which he is creating in his immortal self is the new man. And it is not only the soul which suffers, but the body suffers too. For this is what characterizes man—the influence that the spirit has on his entire physical existence.

We deceive ourselves in thinking that we give all to the child when we give him air and food. Indeed, we do not give even this; food and air are not enough for man's body; all the physiological functions depend on the

well-being, and that is the only key to the whole of life. So, also, the child's body lives by the freedom of the soul.

A new hour is about to strike for the relations between mother and child. The modern mother who is prepared to care perfectly for the physical life, and who for such a mission has only yesterday opened her mind to new studies and new ideas and has accepted new responsibilities, is about to take a step forward. Like care, dictated by science, will be demanded of her tomorrow for the intellectual hygiene of the child and for the health of his inner life.

No longer will medicine alone furnish her the necessary teachings, but also a renewed pedagogy based on the positive facts of science. The girls who yesterday, in order to be better mothers, took hospital training, will tomorrow go to children's schools to learn the art of protecting the new lives which are about to be entrusted to them by nature. Then the maternal mission will become complete and woman will turn her steps toward motherhood with open eyes and with the dignity of one who is no longer only a creator but also a protector of posterity, one who guards and saves the body and mind of the new humanity.

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